

CATHERINE'S HIDDEN LIFE

Then she grew silent, began to abstain from food and cruelly to afflict her flesh, wandered to woods and caves to imitate the ancient anchorites of the desert, dreamed of entering the Dominican order in the disguise of a boy, or gathered other little girls of the same age around her, to join in her prayers and discipline themselves together with her. Burning every day more and more with the fire of divine love, she consecrated her virginity to Christ. This, in after years, she told her confessors, was when she was seven years old—which we should, perhaps, interpret as we do Dante's statement of the beginning of his love for Beatrice : " It was about the beginning of her ninth year when she appeared to me, and I saw her about the end of my ninth year."

But, when she had passed the age of twelve and was considered marriageable according to the customs of Siena, her sister Bona-ventura, whom she loved exceedingly, and to whom she could refuse nothing, at their mother's instigation persuaded her to change for a while her mode of life, to dye her hair and adorn her person, dress becomingly, and conform with the fashions of their little world. She bewailed this bitterly in after times as a grievous sin, and did heavy penance for it, accusing herself of having loved her sister more than God ; nor could all the comfortable exhortations of Fra Raimondo make her see it in any other light. Bonaventura died in August, 1362, and Catherine at once returned to her former mode of life. This, however, her father and brothers would not permit, especially after the death of the elder sister, whose husband had been a man of some importance among the adherents of the faction in Siena to which they belonged. They were resolved upon finding a husband for Catherine whose alliance would strengthen the position of their family in the city. Finding her, as they deemed, obstinate and undutiful, they had recourse to a certain Fra Tommaso della Fonte, one of the friars of San Domenico, who had been brought up in their house and was probably a relation of the husband of Catherine's sister Niccoluccia.

This Fra Tommaso is the first of those sons of St. Dominic with whom Catherine was brought into contact—a group of worthy men who, in the midst of all the ecclesiastical corruption